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Fishing for Striped Bass

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Biology

(Morone saxatilis)

Reproduction

Striped bass begin spawning in the spring when the water temperature reaches 60 degrees. Most spawning occurs between 61 and 69 degrees and the spawning period usually extends from April to mid-June. Stripers spawn in open fresh water where the current is moderate to swift. The Delta, especially the San Joaquin River between the Antioch Bridge and the mouth of Middle River, and other channels in this area, is an important spawning ground. Another important spawning area is the Sacramento River between Sacramento and Princeton. About one-half to two-thirds of the eggs are spawned in the Sacramento River and the remainder in the Delta. Female striped bass usually spawn for the first time in their fourth or fifth year, when they are 21 to 25 inches long. Some males mature when they are 2 years old and only about 11 inches long. Most males are mature at age 3 and nearly all females at age 5.

Stripers are very prolific. A 5-pound female may spawn 180,000 eggs in one season and a 15-pound fish is capable of producing over a million eggs. This great reproductive potential and favorable environmental conditions allowed striped bass to establish a large population within a few years after their introduction in California. Striped bass often spawn in large schools. On one occasion, CDFW biologists observed a school of several thousand bass at the surface along the bank of the Sacramento River above Knights Landing. Small groups of three to six bass frequently segregated from this school and splashed and churned in the main current of the river in the act of spawning. At times, five or more groups of bass were observed spawning at once. Usually, a large female was accompanied by several smaller males. While the eggs are still in the female, they are only about 1/25 inch in diameter, but after release, they absorb water and increase to about 1/8 inch in diameter. The eggs are then transparent, making them virtually invisible. During the spawning act, eggs and milt are released into the water. The milt contains microscopic sperm cells which penetrate the eggs and cause them to develop. Striped bass eggs are slightly heavier than water, so a moderate current is needed to suspend them while they develop. Without adequate water movement, they sink to the bottom and die. The eggs hatch in about two days, although the length of time may be somewhat shorter or longer depending upon temperature; hatching is quickest in warm water. The newly-hatched bass continue their development while being carried along by water currents. At first, the larval bass are forced to subsist on their yolk, but in about a week they start feeding on tiny crustaceans which are just visible to the naked eye. By August, they are about two inches long and are feeding primarily on mysid shrimp and amphipods, both bottom-dwelling crustaceans. At this time, they are most numerous from the western Delta to Suisun Bay.

Growth